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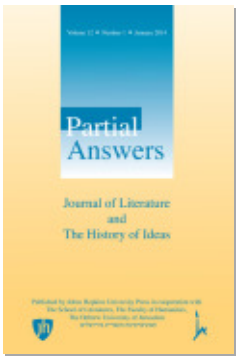

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Susan Fenimore Cooper's Ecology of Reading

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I would like to begin with a footnote, one that occurs close to the end of Susan Fenimore Cooper's amazing, unclassifiable book *Rural Hours* (1850). "We are none of us very knowing about the birds in this country," writes Cooper, "unless it be those scientific gentlemen who have devoted their attention especially to such subjects" (330). The same is true, she claims, when it comes to "our native trees and plants" and "to our butterflies and insects." Hence the need for her book: a painstaking, detailed, attentive account of the changes wrought by the passage of the seasons on the author's own immediate environment in Cooperstown, NY, a place named, but no longer owned, by her family.

In her footnote, Cooper claims that Americans, as a rule, do not pay much attention to the natural world around them. The situation is markedly different in Europe, where a basic interest in such "simple matters," to use Cooper's phrase, can be taken for granted. But American ignorance, deplorable as it is, also has its advantages, at least when you are a writer. "Had works of this kind been as common in America as they are in England," Cooper admits, "the volume now in the reader's hands" would never have been published. *Rural Hours*, as she sees it, is her "rustic primer," a book intended to awaken the reader's interest in nature, in hopes of sending her on to other, more advanced works. Sweeping generalizations ("none of us" really knows anything about American nature) give way to self-disparagement, as happens so often in writings by nineteenth-century women gripped by the anxiety of authorship (see Wolosky). Her book is, claims Cooper, nothing but "chit-chat" and "common-place." She ends deferentially by praising the two male authors who have guided her as she was working on *Rural Hours*, James Ellsworth De Kay, author of *Zoology of New York* (1843–1844), and the garden designer and horticulturalist Andrew Jackson Downing.

But Cooper is being intentionally disingenuous here. There are several obvious problems with her self-characterization. To name just one: why pack all this information away into a footnote? Cooper is giving us the *raison d'être* of her book here, a statement that seems pertinent

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enough to appear right in her preface, next to the sentence in which she makes "no claim whatever to scientific knowledge" (3). It seems richly ironical that Cooper should assert her own lack of academic knowledge in a footnote, the epitome of the very kind of discourse she pretends to be unequal to. But maybe that is exactly what she intended: to indicate to her audience that this is a book in which things are not what they seem. *Rural Hours* is, in a word, a *complex* primer. American literary history began in the instructional mode, with the famous *Massachusetts Bay Primer*, which began, chillingly, with the following rhyme, supposed to help young Puritan children memorize the letter A: "In Adams Fall / We sinned all."

Cooper's *Rural Hours* offers lighter fare, and its target audience was not unsuspecting children but American adults. And the world around them is no longer the "howling wilderness" shudderingly perceived by William Bradford but the hills of New York State, becoming "more bare every day" (132), offering no refuge for wild animals, such as the bear, the beaver, and the otter. Worried about what she calls her fellow citizens' "careless indifference" to such developments (134), Cooper conceives of *Rural Hours* as her antidote, an attempt to make American readers appreciate what is left of the wilderness, as if teaching them how to read carefully (or *ecologically*, within the terms I am proposing here) would then lead to a renewed sense of care for ourselves and the environment. For Cooper, this also means questioning familiar narratives — such as the seasonal cycle — so that we regain our appreciation of the strangeness of the world that we share with other beings.

I

Cooper's "rustic primer" does not look much like your average textbook, even by nineteenth-century standards. The four chapters, "Spring, "Summer," "Autumn," and "Winter," provide a basic structure, but within that rough outline chaos reigns supreme, with observations, quotations, and reminiscences stuffed into diary entries that may be as short as a paragraph or as a long as several pages. But *Rural Hours* is not a diary either: it does not, as one might expect of a diary, really offer much insight into the personality of the writer herself. As if to draw attention to what she does not want to reveal to her readers, Cooper clings to the first-person plural pronoun or uses elliptical sentences from which the subject has been omitted altogether. Even in her preface, Cooper decorously removes herself from the picture, preferring the impersonal "one" where she is describing the method by which her book was compiled:

"In wandering about the fields, during a long, unbroken residence in the country, one naturally *gleans* many trifling observations on rustic matters, which are afterward remembered with pleasure by the fireside, and gladly shared, perhaps, with one's friends" (3; my italics).

"Gleaning" is not a casual lexical choice here, although the context in which Cooper uses the word seems to indicate precisely that. One of the most frequently quoted sources throughout *Rural Hours* is the biblical Book of Ruth, a story about a gleaner, really the prototype of all gleaners. We might not be inclined to attribute to Susan Fenimore Cooper, by her own definition a rather humble worker in the vineyards of literature, the degree of conscious artistic shaping that my analysis finds at work in her book. But we might remember here not only Cooper's own formidable erudition — gained in the libraries and schoolrooms of France, where her father had taken the family in 1826 to hone his own writing skills — but also the fact that the better part of her adult life was actually spent doing literary work, first as her father's private secretary and then as his literary executor and editor. Writing, for Cooper, was not an incidental activity. Thus, when she calls herself a gleaner and devotes several pages to yet another gleaner, the biblical Ruth, we may safely assume this to be part of a more complex form of self-stylization.

Cooper reads the Bible as an Old World literary text, not as a religious manifesto or a historical source intended to create an "epic backdrop for the ancestry of David" (Sasson 320). For her, the Book of Ruth is a compelling story about how female persistence wins the prize at the end. More specifically, she is interested in the work that Ruth did**.** A widow herself, the Moabite woman Ruth accompanies her widowed mother-in-law Naomi back to Israel, where she provides for both of them by working in the barley fields of one of Naomi's relatives, Boaz: "And Ruth the Moabitess said unto Naomi, Let me now go to the field, and glean ears of corn after him in whose sight I shall find grace. And she said unto her, Go, my daughter" (Ruth 2:2). As Cooper glosses the passage, "in those ancient times, the people all lived together in towns and villages for mutual protection, as they did in Europe during the middle ages — as they still do, indeed, to the present hour, in many countries where isolated cottages and farm-houses are rarely seen" (161). The needs of the community override the concerns of the individual.

In *Rural Hours*, it is very important for Cooper that Ruth may not have been beautiful. We hear a great deal about her devotion to Naomi, her gentleness, her humility; but her looks are never mentioned. She may have been "merely one of those faces which come and go without being followed, except by the eyes that know and love them" (162). Her appar-

ent lack of physical charms puts the spotlight even more firmly on Ruth's moral qualities, which then do not fail to impress Boaz the landowner. He marries her, thus bringing to a happy conclusion a story focused on the values of unconditional friendship and hard work. Not beautiful but competent, Ruth, by dint of her persistence and steadfast character, earns her place in the community. Cooper undermines James Thomson's updated "romantic" version of the Book of Ruth in *The Seasons* (1726–1730), in which "lovely Lavinia," forced to glean "with smiling patience" the fields of Palemon, wins the latter's heart because of her "native grace" and natural beauty (Thomson 139–40). Ruth is no Lavinia. Her unattractiveness, incidentally, also looms behind Cooper's novel *Elinor Wyllys Or, The Young Folk of Longbridge* (1846), the story of homely, orphaned Elinor who nevertheless finds happiness in marriage after her (improbably named) erstwhile lover Harry Hazlehurst renounces his desire for the lovely Jane Graham and meekly returns to "that plain face which appeals to his more generous feelings" (581). Although one character in the novel calls Elinor "downright ugly" (571), within the logic of Cooper's narrative such plainness is not a disadvantage. Since, as Elinor's dying mother indelicately points out in a letter she leaves for her daughter, she will never find a husband, Elinor is free from the duties of the married woman and can perform tasks for society that only single women can perform, provided they are "properly educated" (211), which Elinor, speaker of several languages, definitely is. It is obvious that uncomely Elinor/Ruth is Cooper's veiled self-portrait, though with one important difference: despite her mother's prediction, Elinor does experience the gratification (marriage and children) that forever evaded her author in real life.

During her years in France, Cooper would have seen gleaners in the fields, even just outside Paris. She would have known that this was hard, back-breaking work, performed after the main work had already been done. Imagine the sickle going through the wheat, cutting each stalk halfway. Imagine the cut grain on the ground, then gathered and bound and tied into sheaves on the ridge of the field. Imagine the workers returning to the field, using rakes to gather up whatever might have been left. Despite all these efforts, a portion of the harvest, the spilt grain, always remained (in the Jewish tradition, deliberately so). It was left to the gleaners, laborers who did not have any land of their own to harvest. Gleaning is a *collective* effort, performed by the poor, for the poor, an inglorious task (some farmers would simply release their pigs or chickens to take care of the rest). Tolerated, if not exactly celebrated, by European landowners, gleaning amounted to a sort of feudalistic welfare program (King), one

that took place on the margins of society, performed by marginal people, people best ignored. Note the passionately negative responses elicited by a painting displayed at the Paris Salon a few years after the publication of *Rural Hours*. Jean-François Millet's *Des Glaneuses* or *Gleaners* (1857; Musée d'Orsay) shows three peasant women picking up stray grains of wheat in an otherwise bare-seeming field, while in the background bountiful shocks of grain, the "official" harvest, are resplendent in the golden light of the afternoon. At the time, French critics resented the "ugliness and grossness" of the subject depicted: "Il me déplaît de voir Ruth et Noémi arpenter, comme les planches d'un théâtre, le champ de Booz," wrote the eminent journalist Paul de Saint Victor, referring to the biblical prototype of all humble gleaners anywhere: "I dislike seeing Ruth and Naomi traversing the field of Boaz as if it were the stage of a theatre" (Marcel 26).

Millet's painting accurately reflected the practice of gleaning but also the manner in which it had been featured in paintings for decades: the gleaners bent over, their faces turned towards the earth, their whole bodies hard at work. Raised in Europe, Cooper had surely seen representations of the subject, such as the one (fig. 1) created by the self-taught British painter and printmaker Samuel Palmer (1805–1881).

Fig. 1: Samuel Palmer (1805–1881), *The Gleaning-Field,* ca. 1833. Tempera on mahogany, 305 x 454 mm. The Tate Gallery, London.

In Palmer's landscape the gleaners seem almost incidental: huddled into the left half of the composition, their hunched over bodies an implicit denial to them of the erect position that traditionally constitutes the distinctively human. It is difficult to tell them from the sheep. The scene appears even more diminished by the humble medium (tempera on wood) in which it is executed. Palmer shows us harvest's aftermath: human agency reduced to a few anonymous bodies hunting for scraps.

No wonder that Cooper was pleased that in America, where she said there was enough food for everybody and women usually did not have to do heavy farm work, the practice was virtually unknown: "we have never yet seen a sight very common in the fields of the Old World: we have never yet met a single gleaner" (158). Where no one *had* to glean, one could choose to do so, at least metaphorically. Enter Susan Cooper the gleaner. Literature was, Cooper once said, in one the prefaces she composed later in life for her father's novels, a *jeu d'esprit*, a way for the mind to take delight in the games it can play (1861: 23).

But the question remains: why would Cooper, even in jest — and, for that matter, in a book that not only has an American but a distinctly regional emphasis — adopt an obsolete "Old World" agricultural metaphor to describe her own practice as writer?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists two basic meanings for "gleaning." The first refers to the type of work that would have been performed by the biblical Ruth and — if she had not been too busy looking lovely — also by Thomson's Lavinia. The second meaning is a more figurative one, and that is the one that really interests Cooper: "to gather or pick up in small quantities." American fields might not need gleaners, but American minds still do. Liberated, since she is an American woman, from the need to toil in the field, Susan Fenimore Cooper, Ruth-like, becomes the gatherer of all those unharvested, inchoate ideas and observations that, collectively, will help put an end to her readers' intellectual destitution. Or so she hopes.

II

Gleaning is an autumnal activity, something that is done *after* the fall harvest is completed. As such, it is featured in one of the most famous poems about Autumn, the master text that is lurking behind Cooper's book too, though she never mentions it: "To Autumn," the last of Keats's great odes: "And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep / Steady

thy laden head across a brook" (434). As John Barnard, Keats's modern editor, puts it, "Autumn's particular beauty is dependent upon its transience" (Keats 675) — the stately figure of Autumn, balancing a basket full of the grain she has gleaned, will walk off into the oblivion that is winter. And this is exactly the kind of view Cooper finds unacceptable. Part of the problem is that in Keats's poem the gleaning is already done; this is not the nose-to-the ground, face-bent-towards-the-earth kind of work featured in Palmer's painting. Keats's personification also puts the barrier of anthropomorphism between us and the appreciation of nature for its own sake that is Cooper's avowed goal in *Rural Hours*. Of course, there is a good reason for such anthropomorphosis: the cycle of the seasons is a deeply human ordering device — an effective one, no doubt — that enables us to discover in the waxing and waning of natural things an image of our own lives. How provisional this device is we only realize when it fails to make sense — think of pastoral elegies like Milton's "Lycidas" (where the mournful speaker says he has come to "shatter" the leaves of laurels and myrtles "before the mellowing year") or, in the American context, of the poet Anne Bradstreet lamenting the death of her one-and-a-half-year-old grandchild Elizabeth, "a plant new set," who was not allowed to mature and ripen like the plums and apples on the trees or the corn in the field ("In Memory of My Dear Grandchild Elizabeth Bradstreet"; Bradstreet 235). Of all the seasons, Autumn has had to carry the heaviest burden of human over-interpretation. And yet, Cooper argues, Autumn has never been fully understood. Poets especially have been unable to deal with a season they see as either "no-longer-summer" or "not-yet-winter." The European writers she loves frequently describe it in negative terms: as "melancholy wight" (Wordsworth) or as "pâle Automne" (Jacques Delille) and as wearing a "welker Kranz," a withered wreath (Schiller).

Cooper knew this kind of seasonal poetry well. The sequence of the seasons is the master metaphor governing her anthology *The Rhyme and Reason of Country Life* (1855), a collection devoted to the pleasures of rural existence, which, following a long tradition of pastoral poetry and Arcadian romance, offered, she felt, "more repose of mind" than the city and would help free us from "the fever of commercial speculations, the agitation of political passions, the mental exertion required by the rapid progress of science, by the ever-recurring controversies of philosophy and, above all, that spirit of personal ambition and emulation so wearing upon the individual" (30). If this is none too original, her selection of texts certainly is. The specimens Cooper gathers — or should we

say, *gleans* — in her anthology are truly cosmopolitan ones, including samples from Denmark ("To Spring," by Thomas Thaarup), Italy (Petrarch's "Spring"), Sweden (Carl Michael Bellman's "Up, Amaryllis!"), France (sonnets by the Duke of Orleans, translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and others), as well as Greek and Latin authors (Virgil and Sappho). Cooper's encyclopedic reading often leads to surprising juxtapositions. For example, Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" is followed by "The Nightingale," by a sixteenth-century Dutch female poet, Maria Tesselschade Visscher (97), which, in turn, is followed by a ballad from the pen of the fifteenth-century Portuguese poet Gil Vicente. Cooper also cheerfully mixes genres, including a letter on trees by Gilbert White, entries from the journal of naturalist J. L. Knapp, and a story by Audubon ("The Hurricane"). The biblical Ruth makes a brief appearance, too, in a poem by Thomas Hood which, rather against the available evidence, reinvents Ruth as a symbol of erotic power: "She stood breast-high amid the corn, / Clasp'd by the golden light of morn, / Like the sweetheart of the sun, / Who many a glowing kiss had won" (163). The somewhat miscellaneous nature of the anthology genre does not for a moment distract Cooper from her goals: to offer evidence of the wholesomeness of country life and to put a plug in for Autumn, or at least the American version of it, which, Cooper feels, has not been understood by anyone except the American poets. They, for sure, have "taken great delight in singing the high-toned magnificence of the season, as well as that delicacy and sweetness of aspect which often adds an exquisite charm to the brilliancy of autumnal beauty under our native skies" (322). Autumn in America indeed has its own, distinctly non-European charms: "from the first tinge of peculiar coloring to the last smile of the Indian Summer, the season is full of interest and beauty, of ever-varying aspects" (322). Next to the predictably gloomy European stuff — Thomas Hood's "Where are the songs of summer?" and James Thomson's "mournful grove" — Cooper is able to feature poems she feels represent the different American take on Autumn, poems that praise fall as "the season when the light of dreams / Around the year in golden glory lies" (Thomas Buchanan Read) or that evoke the unique sounds associated with the season, as in a startling poem by the now forgotten Albany poet Alfred Street: "Far sounds melt mellow on the ear: the bark — / The bleat — the tinkle — whistle — blast of horn — / The rattle of the wagon-wheel — the low — / The fowler's shot — the twitter of the bird, / And e'en the hum of converse from the road" (323, 329, 330).

But Cooper's ambition is not limited to giving American Autumn its long overdue recognition. She wants her readers to reflect more generally on the use of the seasons as an ordering device. She was a devout Episcopalian, to be sure, but she also knew that the seasonal cycle, tied to specific months on the calendar, was a cultural construction, not an ordinance received from God. One culture's May might be another culture's December. In one of her headnotes in the anthology, she asks mockingly: "Conceive of Hottentot elegies and Fejee sonnets enlarging upon the balmy airs and soft skies of November; raving about the tender young blossoms of December, and the delicate fruits of January" (1855: 111). Really, one does not need to have one's mind travel as far as Africa or the Fejee Islands. Again, think of Ruth, not Thomas Hood's blushing girl breast-high amid the corn, but the altruistic, hard-as-nails biblical character stooping to pick up grains of barley from the ground: "Ruth must have gleaned the fields of Boaz during the month of May, or some time between the Passover and Pentecost — festivals represented by our Easter and Whitsunday — for that was the harvest-time of Judea" (1850: 205). Some cultures, then, glean in what elsewhere is considered the springtime. If its attributes are negotiable and depend on where you happen to be in the world, then "Autumn" has no absolute reality except in our own, place-bound imagination. And although Cooper, both in *Rural Hours* and *Rhyme and Reason,* adheres to the sequence of the seasons as a structuring principle, she uses this template to advocate a non-sequential reading that encourages spontaneity over narrative rigidity.

Consider, as an example of the reading practice that Cooper has in mind, the last entry in her "Autumn" chapter, a short, concentrated passage. "Pleasant," it begins, which is not at all what we would expect to hear in a journal entry written on November 30. As elsewhere, Cooper eliminates the authorial subject — an essential part of her strategy of self-effacement: "Long walk in the bare open woods; neither heard nor saw a bird" (251). From a distance, Emerson's *Nature* might be beckoning here, the "bare ground" on which he is standing in the woods as he is about to be uplifted into "infinite space," into an ecstatic merging with the horizon where he will behold the beauty of his own infinite being (10). But the landscape Emerson imagines is one shaped by the imminent expectation of spring, both metaphorically and literally. Cooper's achievement in this entry is that she finds pleasure in a landscape where there are no overt signs of life, no expectation of anything other than what is now. The bareness of the landscape triggers a memory in her, and she cites two lines not from one of her beloved American poets but — to

make a point — from a lugubrious French ballad, "La chute des feuilles" ("The Fall of the Leaves"), by Charles-Hubert Millevoye. Here is a more generous sampling of the poem (Cooper quotes only lines 3 and 4), first in the original, then in the anonymous translation a contemporary reader would have found in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1845 anthology *The Poets and Poetry of Europe*:

De la dépouille de nos bois
L'automne avait jonché la terre;
Le bocage était sans mystère,
Le rossignol était sans voix.
Triste, et mourant à son aurore,
Un jeune malade à pas lents,
Parcourait une fois encore
Le bois cher à ses premiers ans:

"Bois que j'aime, adieu, je succombe.
Votre deuil a prédit mon sort,
Et dans chaque feuille qui tombe
Je lis un présage de mort.
Fatal oracle d'Épidaure,
Tu m'as dit: Les feuilles des bois
A tes yeux jauniront encore,
Et c'est pour la dernière fois." (45)

AUTUMN had stripped the grove, and strewed
The vale with leafy carpet o'er,
Shorn of its mystery the wood,
And Philomel bade sing no more:
Yet *one* still hither comes to feed
His gaze on childhood's merry path;
For him, sick youth! poor invalid!
Lonely attraction still it hath.

"I come to bid you farewell brief,
Here, O my infancy's wild haunt!
For death gives in each falling leaf
Sad summons to your visitant.
'T was a stern oracle that told
My dark decree,—'*The woodland bloom*
Once more 't is given thee to behold,
Then comes the inexorable tomb!'" (484)

Facing his "inexorable tomb," the youth in Millevoye's poem knows that his "life's bloom" will be nipped in the bud. He envisions his own imminent burial at the very spot that he is visiting. The poem ends with the young man's lonely funeral; the silence of his grave (*le silence du mausolée*) will not be disturbed by anyone except a lonely passing shepherd. It does not get much sadder than that. Millevoye himself died in 1816, at the age of 34, after a singularly unhappy life, marked by the early death of his father as well as failed attempts to become a lawyer or a bookseller; unsurprisingly, this poem, along with the more famous "Priez pour moi" ("Pray for me"), is usually read as a foreshadowing of the poet's own death. Quite apart from such biographical considerations, "La Chute des feuilles" perfectly epitomizes the tradition of autumnal poetry with its "*feuille morte* drapery" Cooper had attacked earlier in her chapter. As we shall see, the tearful, mediocre Millevoye suits Cooper's purpose better than other, perhaps more familiar tributes to the falling of leaves that come to mind (think of Dante's description of the souls as dead leaves in *Inferno* 3.112–14).

III

Cooper now moves, without much of a transition, from Millevoye to a shrub, and one that has long fascinated her. Here is Cooper on the witch-hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*): "The long yellow petals have fallen from the wych-hazel; the nut is beginning to form, the heart slowly becoming a kernel, and the small yellow flower-cups turning gradually into the husk. On some bushes, these little cups are still yellow and flower-like; on others, they have quite a husky look. It takes these shrubs a full year to bring their fruit to maturity" (251). The repetition of the words "cup" and "husk" or "husky" underlines the long, drawn-out nature of the process. What a slow evolution this coming-into-maturity of the witch-hazel's fruit is! The witch-hazel happily ignores the orderly progression of the seasons: it is the last of all native plants to flower, just as its leaves are turning from the dull green of summer to a translucent yellow. The flowering may continue well after all the leaves have fallen off. Not infrequently, we will see the golden petals of the witch-hazel whitened by an early snowfall. Even while the new seed pods, due to mature next year, are just beginning to form, the previous year's pods ripen. "It is interesting that a plant with yellow flowers is the last to blossom," writes Sheila Connor, a horticultural research associate at Harvard's Arnold Arboretum, "because many of our earliest spring-flowering trees and shrubs are

also yellow" (238). Thoreau would have concurred. In his journal, he claimed that the witch-hazel, "October and November's child," reminded him "of the very earliest spring" (2012: 98; entry for October 9, 1851).

The witch-hazel is a shrub particularly suited for human use. Its medicinal properties — thanks to its astringency it would help control of all kinds of hemorrhages — were extolled by C. S. Rafinesque in 1828, but early botanists had seen Native Americans employ it for many purposes, even as a cure for blindness (Rafinesque I: 229–30; Crellin and Philpott 456–57). By contrast, Cooper grants the witch-hazel its own complex life, apart from the needs of human observers, whose ignorance about the plant is obvious from the names they have given it, which seem to rely on its similarity to some other plant: the hazel, in the case of its leaves, and an apple-tree, in the case of the fruit (hence the genus name *Hamamelis*, from the Greek word for apple, μῆλον; see also Gray 152–53). Now Cooper was hardly alone in her admiration for the plant. Thoreau, who was equally intrigued by it, devoted an epigram to it, whose parallel structure mimics, on the page, the oddness of a plant that withers and blossoms at the same time: "While its leaves fall its blossoms spring" (2012: 89). The witch-hazel is an oxymoron, and some observers could not help but attribute religious significance to what they saw: "Mysterious plant!" rhapsodized an anonymous witch-hazel enthusiast in a widely reprinted poem: "to me, thou art an emblem high / Of patient virtue, to the Christian given, / Unchanged and bright, when all is dark beside" (Anonymous). Even naturalists like Thomas Nuttall, a frequent source for Cooper, would add poetic touches to their otherwise sober scientific prose when struggling to account for what they saw. In his *Introduction to Systematic and Physiological Botany*, Nuttall wrote about the *Hamamelis virginiana:* "Its time of flowering, October to November, when almost every flower else, but the lingering Asters, are faded and gone, is, for a shrub, sufficiently singular," as is the display the plant puts on: "when this takes place, the leaves of the plant are daily falling, and on a few but naked branches are its pale yellow, fringe-like, clustered blossoms developed." The almost "Shakespearean" resonances — hints of life residing in bare, ruined choirs from which sweetness has not entirely disappeared — do not linger long, and science duly smothers the poetic impulse: "The flowers grow commonly by threes, with a little involucrum of three bractes at their base; the calyx is 4-cleft; the petals, at first rolled up like a piece of tape, are unusually long and narrow; to these, in the course of the following season, succeed a kind of leathery, 2-horned, 2-celled nuts, at length, cleft at the top, with one elastically coated black seed in each cell" (63).

The American species of witch-hazel had long been known to taxonomists of New World nature. In all its complex glory, it appears in one of the most beautiful plates of *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands* (1731–1747), produced by the father of all New World natural history, the English traveler, zoologist, botanist, artist, engraver, and colorist Mark Catesby (fig. 2).

Fig. 2: *Scolopendra (Le Centipède)*. Engraving from Mark Catesby, *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands*, vol. 2. Appendix, plate 2. The Lilly Library, Bloomington.

There is little obvious connection between the torpid centipede lounging at the bottom of Catesby's image and the cut-off branches of *Hamamelis* hovering above it, but this is precisely the contrast Catesby is able to work to his advantage here. By establishing a visual parallel between the spindly legs of the arthropod and the "long" and "narrow" petals (in Nuttall's words) of the *Hamamelis*'s flowers, he creates an image of surreal strangeness.

The clumsiness of the dreary tube-like animal, condemned to living its life in the dirt, enhances the glory of a plant that blossoms and bears fruit even as its leaves fall off and decay. Note the weightlessness of the plant, a result, too, of a tradition of natural-history painting in which little effort was made to disguise the constructed nature of the image. And constructed it certainly was: it seems that Catesby had not seen the witch-hazel in its native habitat during his years in the American South; the specimen depicted in the plate had been sent to him "in a case of earth" by a Mr. Clayton from Virginia. But the sheer luminosity of Catesby's colors — the splendid, if fragile yellow of the petals of the witch-hazel's blossoms contrasting with the varied green and brown hues of the leaves and the soil, so insistently solid — more than make up for the lack of first-hand observation. Catesby's witch-hazel struts the page like some weird creature with branches for legs, dominating the worm at its feet.

Unlike Catesby, Cooper had seen the witch-hazel in action. And even more than Catesby, she knew one thing: plants are powerful creatures. Far from being objects of contemplation or lurking at the fringes of our perception, they are material presences as well as active participants in the world we inhabit. The witch-hazel does so in the most literal sense possible. Cooper imagines the seeds forming: the heart "becoming a kernel, and the small yellow flower-cups turning gradually into the husk" (251). It will, she notes, take them a full year to ripen. When they finally pop, seed will shoot out of them, to a distance of up to twenty feet, with a sound that Thoreau, who gathered some of the witch-hazel's nuts to observe at home, likened to "the fall of some small body on the floor" (1993: 80).

Small wonder, then, that people have attributed magical qualities to this tree, using its twigs as divining rods for underground water, for example. In "A Dissolving View," an essay she contributed to a volume called *The Home Book of the Picturesque: or, American Scenery, Art, and Literature* (1852), Cooper — who always prefers to spell "witch" as "wych," as if to underline the plant's mystery and archaic oddness — swings a leafless twig taken from the shrub to transform imaginatively the autumnal landscape before her: the sea of colors, of shades of scarlet, crimson, and pink, around her, making a village in the distance (is it Cooperstown?) disappear and then re-appear, metamorphosed into a settlement somewhere in Europe, a cluster of houses centered around a church. A roving bee, attracted to the blossoms on the twig, stings her and brings her dream to an abrupt end (2002: 14–15). In *Rural Hours*, the witch-hazel has a similarly transformative power and the fantasy lin-

gers, productively troubling the generally accepted seasonal narrative, which sees fall as merely transitory, as something that takes place between the end of summer and the beginning of winter, as not-quite-life and not-quite-death. This was not an entirely new project — Keats's "To Autumn" remains western literature's iconic attempt to imagine fall as having a dignity of his (or her) own. But Christopher Ricks, in what to my mind remains the best interpretation of the poem, has pointed out the many ways in which "To Autumn," in a fashion that is almost "distasteful" to the reader, conjures up a feeling not of repose but of pressure — the pressure of the cider-press, the pressure that swells the gourd and plumps the hazel shells and weighs on the gleaner's head as she steps across the brook. The comforts of fall are accompanied by the discomforts of falling — the falling of the leaves, the apples, the drops of cider coming from the press. Cooper's witch-hazel does not so much subvert this narrative as alerts us to just how much it reflects our own needs. Far from being merely an object of our contemplation, the plant becomes an agent in its own right.

In *The Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan claims that "plants are so unlike people that it's very difficult to appreciate fully their complexity and sophistication" (xix). What Cooper is doing in *Rural Hours* is precisely to suggest how such complexity *can* be appreciated. As a devout believer, Cooper would have subscribed to the notion that the passage of the seasons was a dispensation of God's will, as the minister Timothy Dwight put it in his sermons (Dwight 119, 164, 203, 227, 228): a magnificent reminder of His presence in our lives and evidence of the simplicity and uniformity of His will. But Cooper was enough of a cosmopolite to know that one culture's autumn is another culture's spring. And as a naturalist, she also knew that the idea of the allegedly natural order of the seasons all too neatly corresponds to a deeply human (and culture-bound) notion of life — we like to think that plants blossom and wither the way our lives prosper and decline. The witch-hazel reminds us of this collaborative human-botanical narrative precisely by not cooperating with it. And Cooper in turn cooperates with the witch-hazel by raising questions, if ever so subtle ones, about the seasonal narrative as a whole.

The time-transcending qualities of the witch-hazel provide an appropriate transition to Cooper's observation, in the next paragraph of her "Autumn" chapter, on the green fields of winter wheat — plants that will grow up to six inches before the first freeze, lie dormant during the winter, and then grow again in the spring. Apart from those bright fields promising future harvest, the farmhouses were the only reminders of hu-

man presence. They seem drab, an impression reinforced by the view of the intense blue water of Otsego Lake that ends this section. Forget "pâle Automne"; Cooper's lake is "*deep blue* just now; it seems to be more *deeply blue* in the autumn than at other seasons; to-day, it is many shades *darker* than the sky, almost as *blue* as the water in Guido's Aurora" (251; my emphasis). Again Cooper employs repetition; cramming three references to blue, not an autumnal color, into what is grammatically still one sentence. The dark blue of the lake's water is not the ethereal blue of the sky; its concentrated power and the immediate effect it has on her ("just now") sends her groping for an analogy. She finds it in the water depicted in "Guido's Aurora." In the index to the University of Georgia Press edition of *Rural Hours* the "Guido" in the final line of the passage I have just quoted is identified as the thirteenth-century Latin poet "Guido delle Colonne"; but it seems to me that Cooper is alluding here to Guido Reni and his *Aurora* (1614), a fresco in the Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi in Rome that was a great hit with many of Cooper's contemporaries (fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Guido Reni (1545–1617), *L'Aurora* (1614), fresco.
Casino Pallavicini Rospigliosi, Rome.

For example, Sophia Peabody, Hawthorne's wife-to-be, kept an outline drawing of the "Aurora" on the wall of her room at 13 West Street in Boston (Tharp 147), and Thoreau was an enthusiastic fan too. On the flyleaf of one of his journals he wrote a poem about Reni's fresco — lines suffused with excitement over the new beginning that Reni's design symbolized to him.

Like Cooper, Thoreau, who had seen a print of Reni's fresco in Emerson's parlor, was not so much interested in the mythological to-do in the

foreground of the composition, where we see Apollo rising in his chariot and Dawn flying through the air scattering flowers (Sanborn 56). What caught his eye was the suppressed motion of the ocean in the right bottom corner, wakened to rippling life by a new day:

> The early breeze ruffles the poplar leaves,
> The curling waves reflect the washed light,
> The slumbering sea with the day's impulse heaves,
> While o'er the western hills retires the drowsy night.
> (2001: 537)

Reni's celebration of a new life helps Cooper re-assert and summarize her deconstructive reading of Autumn, not as the season where things come to an end (Millevoye's "pâle Automne") but as a time when the earth is teeming with the promise of things to come. Readers familiar with the full text of Millevoye's "La Chute des feuilles" will recognize that Cooper's reference to Guido's Aurora offers an implicit critique of that poem. While Millevoye's speaker is dying as his life is just beginning — "mourant à son aurore" — Cooper ends her entry with a vision of a new "Aurora" or daybreak. Keats's "To Autumn," as Christopher Ricks has described it, is a poem of *parting*, "the parting of the day, the parting of the swallows, the parting of Autumn, the parting from life" (212). Cooper's diary entry, written on the last day of November, is a morning song, an aubade.

IV

In a late essay written for the *Ladies' Home Journal*, "The Talent of Reading Wisely" (1892), Cooper would rail against those of her contemporaries who were not sufficiently thankful for one of the greatest privileges bestowed upon the American people "to a larger extent than any other nation," namely "the ability to read." Reading may prove to be a blessing or a curse, according to the uses we make of it. Alas, laments Cooper, for every good book fifty trashy ones get printed and read in the United States, books whose pages are "more or less tainted with weak folly, wicked precept, presumptuous infidelity, degrading impurity." What seems like little more than a belated echo of the reactionary warnings about the dangers of novel-reading voiced earlier in the century assumes new significance when applied to Cooper's *Rural Hours*, where "the talent of reading wisely" and, more importantly, against the grain turns out to be of crucial importance for the study of nature's continually unfolding narrative.

One might be tempted to say here that the lesson of Cooper's primer is that nature transcends all human ordering devices. But, of course, such an insight into the assumed superiority of nature is itself a product of human ordering — Cooper's creative decision is to both use and subtly subvert the seasonal cycle, so that we may see more deeply, more intimately, more truthfully. Besides, would it really help Cooper's environmentalist cause to reinvent nature as an abstract entity, forever unknowable, beyond all human imagining? That was not the kind of nature Cooper saw around herself, scarred by the damage her fellow citizens had been inflicting on it. Cooper knew, in other words, that the wilderness (or what was left of it) depended on civilization — on our "civilized" decision to take responsibility for its continued survival. Thinking "the ecological thought," Timothy Morton has argued, means realizing how everything depends on everything else and how our narratives (of which the sequence of seasons is only one example) are and must be subject to constant revision. This willingness to revise and resubmit, to suspend disbelief when necessary, is the root of the humility noticed by some of Cooper's recent critics (Kreger, Weinstein). Morton has sometimes been accused of enthusiastic oversimplification, but his critique of anthropocentrism is actually quite subtle. To accuse someone of anthropocentrism, he argues, requires itself an anthropocentric viewpoint. More specifically, to "claim that someone's distinction of animals and humans is anthropocentric, because she privileges reason over passion, is to deny reason to nonhumans" (76). Instead, Morton pleads for a democracy of all life-forms, a "vision of intimacy" in which we are free to recognize the strangeness of strangers (74–79). Narratives such as that of the sequence of seasons familiarize such strangeness. Cooper asks us to take a step back and to look again: her truly strange witch-hazel, so remarkably active in autumn one year and wildly shooting its seeds into the world the following year, is a perfect reminder that it does not make sense to "divide the world into active subject and passive objects," into people on one side and plants on the other (Pollan xxi). The seasons do not change to help humans make sense of the changes in our lives — in fact, as the example of the witch-hazel shows, sometimes they do not change at all, or they co-exist rather than alternate.

Susan Fenimore Cooper wrote out of a passionate attachment to local, small things, the kinds of things a gleaner would see and gather and that a man armed with a scythe would overlook. Like the witch-hazel, her slow-moving book changes and yet does not change. It thus becomes nothing less than a veiled critique of the paternalistic impulse that helped

found the very place she writes about, a critique of the very same spirit that led her grandfather to name that former wilderness, proudly, Cooperstown. Reading ecologically, for Cooper, means gleaning, as Ruth did in Israel, in May. It means harvesting after the harvest is done, finding spring in the fall, and fall in the spring, the human in the natural, and the natural in humanity, and poetry in a branch of *Hamamelis*. It is a commonplace, trite, and all-too predictable self-legitimizing move in literary criticism these days to say that something one has discovered in a past century powerfully forecasts what we, evolved as we are, know for sure today. But if I now, in the final sentence of this essay, do indeed claim that Susan Fenimore Cooper's nineteenth-century ecology of reading, in which "everything" appears "hitched to everything else" (Marshall 8), fully embodies and thus anticipates what many modern ecocritics hold near and dear, I wish I could be understood to be doing so less in order to bolster my modern, supposedly more enlightened view of things than to say: what a shame that no one listened, that no one really read.

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